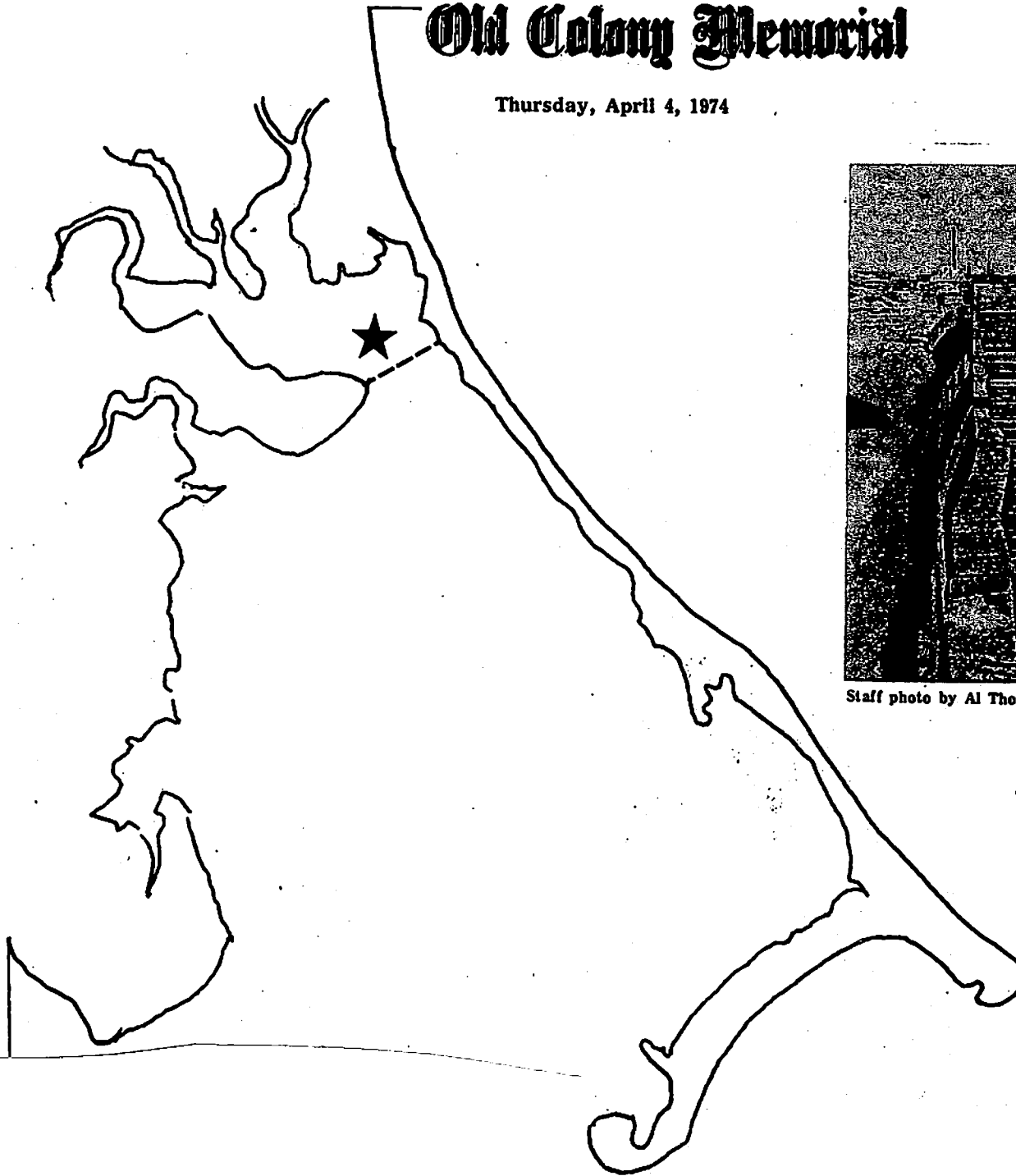


Old Colony Memorial

Thursday, April 4, 1974



Staff photo by Al Thompson

The

Once it was known as Longbridge or the Gurnet Bridge but now the bridge which connects Powder Point in Duxbury with Saquish and the Gurnet is just called Powder Point Bridge. It is an impressive sight. The weathered wooden planks stretch gracefully over the bay to the dunes beyond, while seagulls call to one another from the pilings and fishermen rest easily on the rails enjoying the solidarity of wind and sea. Little in this scene has changed in the 82 years since the bridge was built. And due to the defeat of a proposal to replace the aging structure, little is likely to change. For the present, at least.

For the past few years the decision to repair or to replace the bridge has been the subject of considerable debate among Duxbury residents. The dispute began to crystallize at a special town meeting held on Oct. 16, 1972 where it was recommended that the town appropriate the amount of \$15,000 for the purpose of obtaining final plans or specifications for the repairs to or replacement of Powder Point Bridge. Although the motion was carried by a majority vote with an amendment to delete the words "or replacement of" from the original motion, many felt, nevertheless, that the bridge should be replaced.

This view was based on the theory that it would be far more costly to maintain the bridge in its present condition than to replace it with a new structure. This was further reinforced by the report of an engineering firm who examined the bridge in August, 1971, and recommended that the bridge, as it existed then, should be condemned.

The majority of Duxbury residents, however, do not

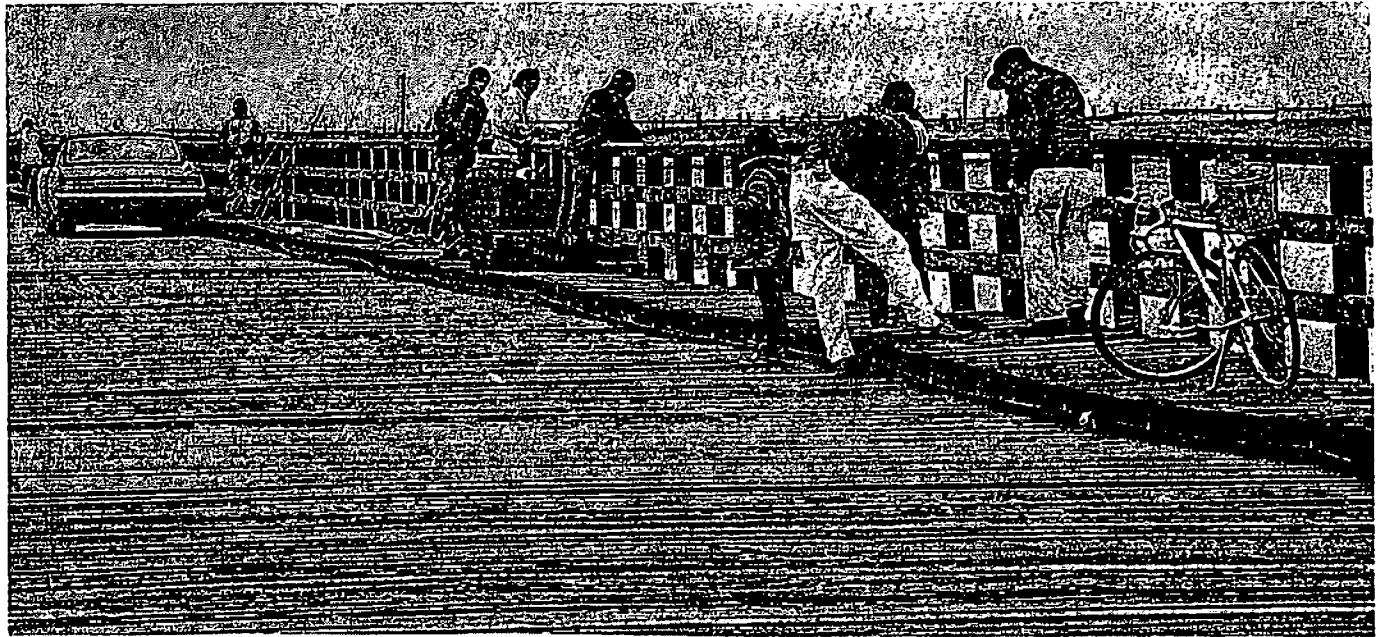
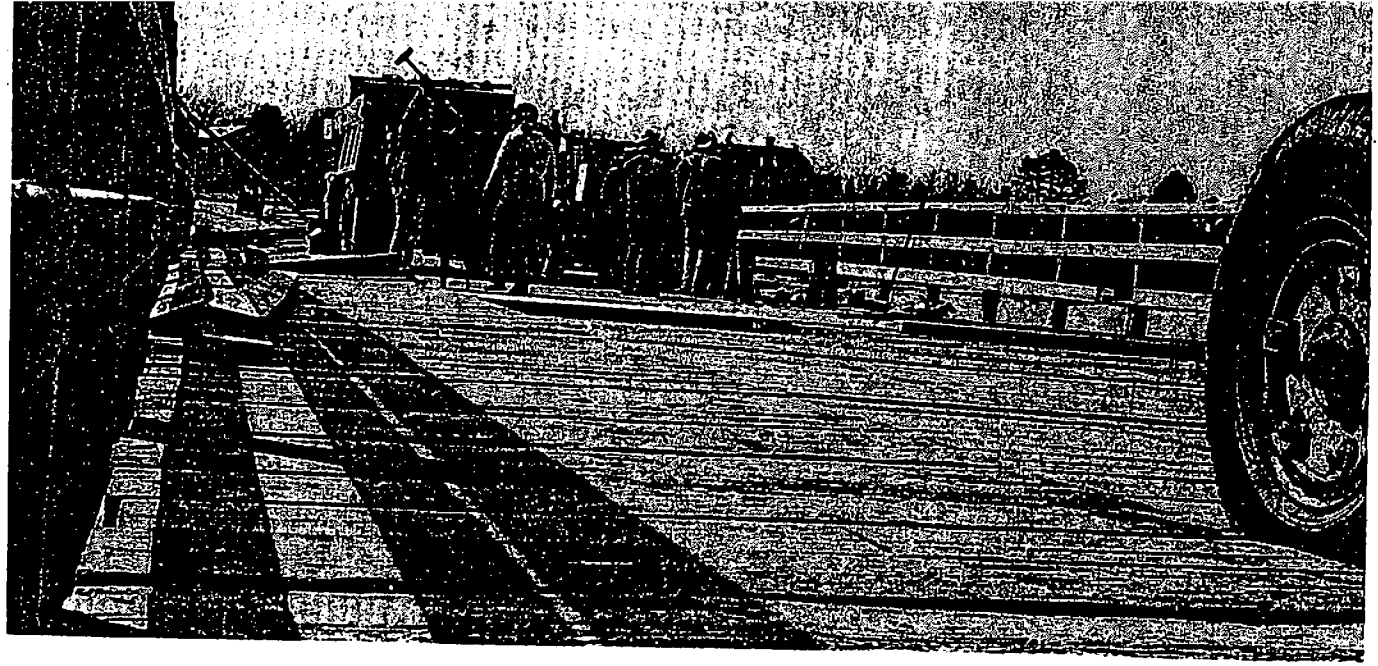
agree. They feel that, even if for only sentimental reasons, the bridge should be saved. This was evidenced at the Town Meeting held on March 19 at which an article to appropriate \$55,000 for the final plans and specifications for the replacement of the bridge was voted down by the residents.

All this dispute is not without precedent. The old wooden bridge which stands at the center of the debate has been awash in controversy since its inception.

According to newspaper accounts published in the late 1880's, many residents of Duxbury were looking for ways "to raise the valuation and increase the population" of their town.

William J. Wright, a prominent member of the community proposed the building of a bridge from Powder Point to Salters Beach. Those in favor of the idea agreed that it would greatly benefit the town by "bringing it in direct communication with the entire stretch of beach on the outside of the bay, shortening the road several miles, and making it practicable to build a handsome line of cottages, thus raising the town valuation thousands of dollars".

Those who were against the bridge opposed it on the



grounds that it would plunge the town deeper into debt which it could ill afford, as the railroad debt was quite enough to carry each year.

A town meeting was held in Duxbury on Nov. 20, 1889 and the second article in the warrant was "to see what action the town will take in regard to the construction of a pile bridge from Powder Point to Duxbury Salter's Beach after hearing such discussion as may be had on the subject."

After "strong speeches from both sides" the vote was 65 to 45 in favor of the bridge. Authorization for the building of the bridge was given by Chapter 301 of the Acts of 1887. It was agreed that the county would assume one-third of the cost of construction and the town would pay the remaining two-thirds, and work on the bridge began.

Plans called for the bridge "to be a continuation of the county road; keeping about straight with it across the bay, a distance of 2,407 feet, the driveway to be 24 feet wide with footpath outside overhanging the main bridge." The draw was to clear 28 feet, "allowing ample room for boats as large as can possibly sail up as far as the bridge."

1891 newspaper reports indicated that construction of the bridge was progressing well. The contractor had been supplied with piles of a variety of lengths and the driver was being kept busy when the weather allowed. The contractor had agreed to complete the work by June 18, 1892 or forfeit \$25 a day until it was finished.

One account read: "Work is now going on on the flat which necessitates high water for the scow to keep afloat, so not many piles can be driven there in one day.

"The only thing that will prevent work in the driving line is the very high wind which makes the water of the bay rough, and so keeps the scow in motion, preventing sure and most effective blows on the leads of the piles. Rarely does a day pass, however, but what some piles can be driven and when the day is calm, 16 piles are often pounded into place."

The townspeople were pleased, not only with the convenience of no longer having to travel the extra five or six miles through the town of Marshfield to get to the beach, but with the prospect of Duxbury developing into a fine summer resort.

One local newspaper commented: "Some of the townspeople did a good deal of hard work to kill the bridge project before it was permanently settled. But now that the bridge is underway they are as interested and enthusiastic as those who were in favor of it. Quite a number of kickers were the first to get a job of work on the bridge, by furnishing or drawing piles, and will get more out of it than the extra amount of taxation can ever call for. The Gurnet Bridge is now universally in favor of the Duxbury people."

The bridge was dedicated in 1885. Four years later, however, it was severely damaged by a storm and several sections had to be removed. The storm of 1898 was so intense that it moved the crest of the beach inland. The Wright family, who owned the beach from the hummock to the Plymouth line and who had originally intended to turn it into a summer resort, abandoned all further development.

In 1919 the Estate of Georgianna Wright offered the property for sale. Fears that the beach might be developed into something on the order of Nantasket or Coney Island prompted a group of local citizens to raise enough money to purchase the property. The Duxbury Beach Association took title on Nov. 29, 1919 and since that time has done everything it could to protect the beach for the benefit of Duxbury.

In 1928 the state attempted to take control of several beaches in Massachusetts, including Duxbury. Strong opposition was organized by the residents, and at the town meeting in March 1929 they voted their disapproval of such an acquisition. At the same meeting, the town voted that if a reservation were established the state would be responsible for providing an approach to the beach that would avoid any thickly-settled part of town, in which case the Gurnet Bridge would be restricted to foot passage only.

The attempt by the state to acquire the property was defeated and the bridge remained open to automobile traffic which by 1930 was becoming quite a problem. The resulting parking difficulties caused the town to vote in 1931 in favor of developing a parking area at the beach end of the bridge which would be open without charge to Duxbury residents only, and a space at the northern end of the bridge for the use of the people of the state.

Because the cost of maintaining the bridge was shared one-third by Duxbury, one-third by Plymouth County and one-third by the towns of Plymouth, Kingston and Marshfield, there was a great deal of dispute as to whether these towns should share the privileges afforded to Duxbury residents or whether Duxbury should assume the entire cost. The residents evidently preferred the latter and in 1941 the bridge and its approaches became the property of the Town of Duxbury.

Continual controversy notwithstanding, the bridge has remained relatively unchanged, and holds the distinction of being the longest wooden bridge of its kind — possibly in the world. Several fires, however, have necessitated the removal of the drawbridge, and the lighthouse originally built for the bridge is now a private residence.

Now, for the present at least, the bridge itself will remain unchanged.